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INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0541
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7394
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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT SHARES HIS VIEWS ON THE
CONFLICT

¶1. SUMMARY: In an early September interview with Indian author and journalist Inderjit Badhwar (full text at www.tamilunitedfront.com/articles/rajapakse.html), President Mahinda Rajapaksa emphasized his desire for a political solution that addresses the aspirations of the Tamil people. He also acknowledged certain constraints to achieving a political solution, including his election promise that any political solution would be based on the idea of a unitary state, and spoke of his desire to see a larger role for India in resolving Sri Lanka's conflict. The President's well-spoken, detailed answers showed a clear understanding of the international community's concerns and expectations with regard to resolving the conflict. End Summary.

¶2. In an early September interview with Indian author and journalist Inderjit Badhwar, President Mahinda Rajapaksa emphasized his desire for a political solution that addresses the aspirations of the Tamil people. "I recognize the legitimate historic grievances of our Tamil people," he said. "They are Sri Lankans -- proud Sri Lankans. And any organized repression of the rights of any Sri Lankan is a blot on all Sri Lankans." He noted his career as a lawyer and human rights activist and insisted that, "as a human rights activist, I simply cannot be a Sinhala chauvinist. On the contrary I would like to call myself a Sri Lankan nationalist. I have Tamil relatives and heaps of Tamil friends."

¶3. He also, however, acknowledged certain constraints to achieving a political solution. "The only question that is non-negotiable is a divided Sri Lanka," he said, noting that the international community, and even Sri Lanka's Tamils, did not support a divided Sri Lanka. "Federalism is a negative word in Sri Lanka because people think it synonymous with dividing the country...You must remember my political legacy and constraints... I was elected by a Sinhala constituency on an election manifesto which made it clear that an ultimate solution to the ethnic crisis could be evolved only on the basis of a unitary state." He noted that, "in any peace settlement, I have to carry the Sinhala voters with

me...That's why the first step I took was to try and forge what I call a Southern Consensus."

¶4. Rajapaksa reiterated his intention to hold elections in the Eastern Province by the end of the year. "We will demonstrate the viability of a Tamil-Sinhala-Muslim partnership...It will be an example to the North where the LTTE's efforts have been to isolate the Tamil community from the rest of the Sri Lankan people."

¶5. In a nod to his Indian audience, he also spoke of his desire to see a larger role for India in resolving Sri Lanka's conflict. He noted that the "U.S. looks to India today as a responsible nuclear power that can keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace and stability...We too look to India to help us protect our democracy from the threat of terrorism." He added that the "whole world is looking to India to provide the initiative that would move the peace process forward."

¶6. COMMENT: President's well-spoken, detailed answers to Badhwar's questions, calibrated to appeal to an Indian public, show a clear understanding of the international community's concerns and expectations with regard to resolving the conflict. Rajapaksa's emphasis on the Tamil community's legitimate aspirations and acknowledgment of its justified grievances is encouraging, especially in light of his reputation as a hard-liner.

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